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Raiders find no GIs in Laos

WASHINGTON (AP)—U.S.-backed mercenaries—perhaps including some Americans—made two secret forays into Laos recently but found no evidence to support persistent reports that American soldiers missing in the Viet Nam War were captives in a jungle site, administration sources say.

The first trip about six weeks ago failed when the mercenaries were "intercepted and there was a firefight," the sources said, adding that they did not know if there were casualties.

About two weeks ago, the mercenaries reached the jungle camp, described as appearing from high-altitude surveillance photographs to be a stockade, and took photographs of its occupants, according to the sources.

Analysts later concluded that no Americans were pictured and decided the site probably was "some sort of re-education camp" for Orientals, the sources said.

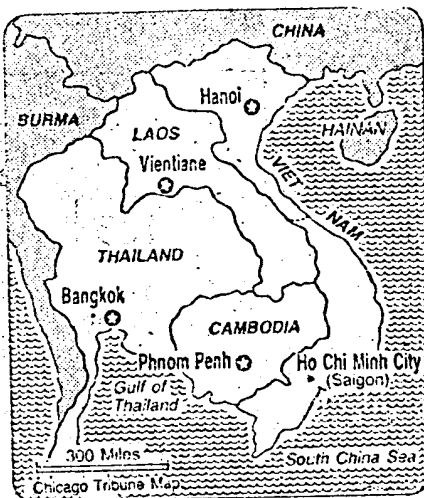
THE SOURCES, who discussed the matter only on condition that they not be identified, indicated that the mercenaries included several U.S. citizens, probably of Oriental descent. But the sources emphatically denied that American military personnel were involved.

The group, which also included Laotians, was sent on the "remote possibility" that missing U.S. service personnel were at the site in communist-controlled Laos, the sources said.

They said the camp had been under observation for "some time" by several methods, including satellite and spy plane photography.

The Washington Post reported Thursday that satellite photos showed human shadows on the ground that some analysts believed were too big to have been cast by Asians.

Photos also showed tools thought to be too large for Asian use, what appeared to



be a guard tower and earthen confinement barriers, and a suggestion that the word B-52 had been formed with bodies or logs, the Post said.

BUT BECAUSE of the possibility that Caucasians in the camp might be Soviet advisers, officials said the photographs could not justify a rescue attempt by U.S. military personnel, according to the report.

For that reason, a team of 20 to 30 mercenaries was recruited and trained in Thailand and sent into Laos on missions similar to one planned by families of soldiers reported missing in action in the Viet Nam War but canceled for lack of funds, the Post said.

The Pentagon says 2,538 Americans are unaccounted for from the Viet Nam War, including 1,237 listed as missing in action. The MIAs include 560 airmen who crashed in Laos, although the Pentagon believes 295 of these were killed.

SOME MIA families and congressmen were told about the two mercenary missions, sources said. The Pentagon neither confirmed nor denied the reports.

Repeating its longstanding position on MIAs, a Pentagon statement said: "There has been a steady flow of reports about Americans being held against their will in Southeast Asia since the flow of Vietnamese from Southeast Asia began. "The U.S. government regularly, and with great care, had and will continue to check the validity of each of these reports. The United States can be expected to take appropriate action if any of these

reports proves to be true. Top priority effort will continue to be assigned to investigate these efforts," the statement said.

In February, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer quoted Sayfa Phounsavan, a former Laos air force pilot, as saying on the basis of refugee reports that "there are today 40 or 50 Americans, most of them pilots who were shot down over Laos during the war, being held prisoner there now."

THE NATIONAL League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia has pressed the U.S. government to try to find and rescue missing servicemen.

Several board members of the organization gave money and moral support to a planned private foray to the Laotian site by 26 men, most of them former Special Forces soldiers and Viet Nam combat veterans who trained near Leesburg in central Florida.

The goal was to reach the camp and liberate at least one of the 29 Americans who the mission's sponsors believed were being held prisoner.

Ann Griffiths, president of the league, made several trips to Florida to pass along intelligence information that she said she received as a member of the Interagency Task Force on POW-MIAs.

Based on data including the B-52 photo, she said she would "bet my life" that Americans are still being held captive in Southeast Asia.